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ABSTRACT

Children of migrant farmworkers have the highest dropout rates, the lowest achievement levels, and the most failures. Performances of migrant children deviate so drastically from the norm that common evaluation techniques are not even valid for this group. Attempts to measure performance in school are consistently invalidated due to the migrant's absence during testing periods, difficulty in attaining test-post test scores, inability of the tester to speak the language of the children and the difficulty of establishing test rapport. However, these are not the only problems faced by the migrant children. This paper presents a brief overview of other unique problems faced by these children. These are: segregation in school, school finance, instructional programs, staffing, dysfunctional responses to their problems, and the response by other social institutions. (NQ)

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# Education and the Children of Migrant Farmworkers: An Overview

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If one had to identify a group of American children who underperform all others in school, the group with the highest dropout rates, the lowest achievement levels and the most failures, it would undoubtedly be the children of migrant agricultural workers.

Performances of migrant children deviate so drastically from the norm that common evaluation techniques are not even valid for this group. Attempts to measure performance in school are consistently invalidated due to the migrant's absence during testing periods, difficulty in attaining test/post test scores, inability of the tester to speak the language of the children and the difficulty of establishing test rapport.

The vast majority of migrant farmworkers in the United States are Mexican American, Black and Puerto Rican; their children suffer the deprivations common to their ethnic or racial minority group, plus additional deprivations due to their economic plight, mobility, and the low social status given them by a more stable society.

This article will discuss the unique set of problems faced by migrant children.

## Segregation

Perhaps the most detrimental educational situation migrant children face is their near exclusion from mainstream educational programs. Migrant children spend the winter in the agricultural areas of the southern states, yet several months before the end of the school year,

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they begin to withdraw in order to accompany their families north in search of work. Some re-enroll in another school for the last weeks of the school year; most do not.

Migrant students who do enroll have a difficult time integrating with permanent students for they are often enrolled in "new" and separate classes, and in segregated facilities such as a barrack or obsolete school building. The migrant child not only faces difficulties adapting to the instructional program, but usually cannot participate in extracurricular activities and other events of the school community.

Having spent the late spring, summer and early fall seasons as transients, the migrant child returns to his/her home base in the late fall, several weeks and perhaps months after the school year has started. By then classes have been formed, teachers have been hired, and again the migrant child fails to become integrated into the mainstream program.

Many school districts perceive the problems of educating migrant children as temporal, and have responded in kind. Since non-migrant children attend school 180 days a year for six hours a day, school personnel hypothesize that if migrant children were to attend only 135 days with the extension of the school day to eight hours this would give the migrant children the same total number of hours, and thus the same educational opportunities.

The operation of segregated facilities locks the migrant child into a separate world, and the use of extended class hours can be interpreted by the migrant child as punishment for being a migrant.

## School Finance

In most states in which migrant children attend school, the standard provision for allocating state resources to a school district is the use of average daily attendance (ADA) or average daily membership (ADM). Under this concept, a school district receives state funds on the basis of the number of children attending school (ADA) or enrolled (ADM). The migrant child poses a problem with this system of finance for often the migrant child is in a school for less than the total number of days in the school year; i.e., if he attends school in a district for 120 days out of a 180 day term, funds in the amount of 120/180 or two-thirds of the annual rate are paid to the district.

On the surface this arrangement may seem justifiable, but school personnel face the dilemma of employing two-thirds of a teacher, buying two-thirds of a desk, or utilizing two-thirds of a textbook. The problem is further compounded by the fact that, unlike other mobil populations where arrivals and departures tend to even out, migrant children tend to arrive and depart at the same time, in keeping with the agricultural rhythm of the community, and severely distorting enrollment figures.

School districts facing these problems tend to encourage the development of negative perceptions and attitudes towards the migrant child. Other types of highly mobile children, such as those of military personnel who bring PL874 and PL815 (Federal Impact Aid) monies which are discretionary and labeled as local funds, are made to feel much more welcome. The advent of the Migrant Amendment to Title 1, ESEA provided additional funds for the education of migrant children, yet the educational impact of this federal funding was negligible. Although Title 1, ESEA funds are available to school districts for migrant children, these

funds must supplement, not supplant, local and state resources. Thus federal migrant programs are built on inadequate local and state foundations.

## Staffing

The arrival of migrant children necessitates the acquisition of additional staff at unusual times. Administrative personnel in home-based schools tend to employ the better teachers at the beginning of the school year. Therefore, personnel hired "as necessary" during the year to accomodate migrant students often do not meet the highest professional standards.

Very few migrants ever finish school, let alone go to college and become educators. It is therefore unusual to find a teacher with personal experiences or even deep insights into the problems and rigors of a nomadic existence. Training school personnel to deal with the migrant child has not been very extensive or productive. Workshops for teaching migrant children usually involve only those teachers dealing exclusively with migrants, and much of the training is remedial oriented and dysfunctional.

## Instructional Program

In spite of the fact that school districts have enrolled migrant children for many years, few major revision has been made in instructional materials or methodologies in order to accomodate the migrant child. For the most part, migrant children use materials developed for white, English-speaking, middle class, geographically stable children which are grossly incompatible with the characteristics of migrant children. Materials and methodologies are not only culturally irrelevant, they are linguistically irrelevant, economically irrelevant,

mobility irrelevant and perceptually irrelevant.

In Texas, for example ninety-nine percent of the migrants are Spanish-speaking, yet only recently have some school districts employed bilingual programs. The same is true for other states. Few school districts utilize materials reflecting the culture, work, or experience of migrants or provide sufficient immediate positive reinforcement for the migrant child. Deferred rewards are meaningless if the migrant child will be in Michigan when the award is being made back in Texas. In few instances do teachers capitalize on the extensive travel and agricultural experience of migrant children or incorporate any of this experience into the curriculum. The reading, writing and arithmetic courses offered in today's schools are far removed from the migrant's experiences.

The worst aspect of school relations with migrant children is the negative perception held by the school and consequently passed on to the children. Regardless of funding, staffing and assignment, as long as the school views their culture, language, work and instability negatively, the performance of migrant children in school will be inadequate.

## Dysfunctional Responses

One very important by-product of the evaluation of migrant education in Texas has been the identification of a large and diverse number of dysfunctional responses to the problems of migrant children. In general, the school either provides a response irrelevant to the nature of the problem, or persists in further punishing the children for being migrants.

Thus, the short period the migrants are in the system, they are further handicapped by the school. The school day may be extended but

instruction is seldom individualized to provide continuity and sequence. Teachers who haven't been able to teach all day are employed to extend their lack of success for extra hours in the afternoon. Movies, filmstrips, audio tapes and other audio-visual aids purchased with Title 1 Migrant Program funds are used, despite the fact that they are developed for white, English-speaking, middle class children.

Perhaps the most dysfunctional responses are in the administrative area. In order to "encourage" migrants to leave later and return earlier, school districts often tend to enact local policies which turn out to be impractical and dysfunctional. Migrant children often lose credits for withdrawing from school before some arbitrarily cut-off date, or do not receive credits for work performed if they enrolled past the deadline.

## Other Social Institutions

The school is not the only institution which fails to respond to the needs of migrants. The area of government employment, housing social services, medicine, welfare, and justice also have an abundance of policies and practices developed for and compatible with a primarily white, English-speaking, middle class and less mobile population. Migrant agricultural workers are commonly excluded from National Labor Relations Board coverage, minimum wage laws, participation in the democratic political process, eligibility for services, and continuity of treatment. It appears that not only the schools, but the entire social system excludes the migrants from receiving basic goods and services, and locks them into successive generations of hopelessness.

## Recommendations

In the education of migrant children there are three needs which must be meet by school districts and state educational systems in order

to remedy their continued failure. These are adaptability, comprehensiveness and resources.

The entire educational structure must be revamped in order to make it compatible with the characteristics of disadvantaged, minority and migrant children. The revamping must go beyond coloring pictures of children in textbooks brown or black and labeling it the "multicultural series". Changes must be made in institutional philosophies, administrative policies, scope and sequence, the curriculum, the extra-curriculum, staffing, student personnel services, non-instructional needs, community involvement and evaluation.

Educational responses to the characteristics of disadvantaged minority and migrant children must be comprehensive. The piecemeal effort now exerted by local, state and federal agencies does little to remedy the existing situation. The migrant child does poorly in school not only because he is culturally and linguistically different, but because he is mobile and poor and culturally and linguistically different. All of these characteristics which are perceived as negative attributes by society, are expressed by the schools, and learned by the child.

Until a comprehensive change in educational practices is brought about, and the necessary financial and personnel resources are allocated, this unfortunate segment of our society will continue to be denied equality of educational opportunity.